Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability

Focus Group 4

Richmond, VA
April 27, 2004
Follow Up Report

Introduction

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

In order to develop a collaborative Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan, the Office of Public Safety is conducting six (6) focus group sessions, comprised mainly of informal and formal leaders from fire, law enforcement, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments. Additional representation includes public health, local and state agencies, in order to accurately capture local perspectives on the state of interoperable communications in Virginia.

The outcomes and purpose of the focus group sessions are as follows:
- ❑ Capture of local emergency responder perspectives on interoperable communications
- ❑ Shared understanding of interoperability issues specific to each region of VA
- ❑ Education and shared awareness of interoperability issues across stakeholder groups
- ❑ Attention paid to emergency responder commonalities as opposed to differences

Each focus group session is designed as a series of conversations centered on the following: interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, recommended strategies to pursue, and barriers to achieving the future state.

Executive Summary

The Richmond focus group session on April 27th, 2004 provided valuable input from the local perspective for the development of the Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan. The focus group identified the following major initiatives to be considered during the strategic planning session on May 18th: (1) establish regional coordinators; (2) educate first

responders on STARS and utilization of existing pathway and radio resources; (3) identify requirements to receive funding; and (4) institute the use of clear plain text on mutual aid channels.

Detailed Overview

Current State

The objective of the Current State is to affirm the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities and mutual aid efforts.

The Richmond focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Day-to-Day interoperability:

- ➢ The Richmond Capital Region is interoperable:
  - o This includes the City of Richmond, Chesterfield County, and Henrico County
  - o The Capital Region Steering Committee is chartered to oversee communications interoperability systems and anticipate future requirements for continued and consistent operation across all public safety agencies
  - o Coordinated purchasing with 3 localities based on the Capital Region's common goal and mission: negotiated independent contracts with Motorola, resulting in over $1 million in cost savings
- ➢ Jurisdictions use different spectrum:
  - o 800 digital: Richmond Capital Region
  - o 800 analog: Hanover County
  - o Highband: Goochland County, State Police, Emergency Management, and Department of Forestry
- ➢ Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) cannot directly communicate by radio with 2/3 of state agencies
- ➢ Richmond region has a highly disparate mix of large and small jurisdictions as compared to other regions of Virginia:

- o The Capital Region operates an 800 system, but smaller neighboring jurisdictions, such as Goochland, are not able to even fund maintenance costs of such a system (800 MHz).
- ➢ Local law enforcement is not able to communicate with State Police
- ➢ Different equipment lifecycles make coordinating purchasing difficult

The Richmond focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Mutual Aid interoperability:
- ➢ As response increases, effectiveness level of useful interoperable communications decreases
  Example: The local first responders, first on the sniper scene, were able to communicate and deployed tactical units. However, when the federal responders entered the scene, there was no communication between the local and federal responders. A federal helicopter was deployed on the scene and spotlighted the tactical units on the ground putting the first responders in danger while the suspects remained at large.
- ➢ Disaster policy exists, but is vague on logistics of handling large scale events
- ➢ Capital police in the field do not have connection to the Capital Region 800 system
- ➢ State agencies have limited capability to communicate with local and federal agencies
- ➢ Insufficient use and standardization of unified command
  - o As different responders come on to the scene, rules and authority changes, resulting in less cooperation and a less unified response

<u>Case for Change</u>
The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's state of interoperable communications do not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Richmond focus group identified the following Case for Change:
- ➢ We need a citizen centered approach to improving interoperable communications – it is our responsibility to protect the community
- ➢ Local representatives shared experiences to exemplify the need for communications interoperability between local, state, and federal responders
  Examples:
  Local S.W.A.T. team units are deployed in response to a sniper incident at a local restaurant to provide aid to the victim and to secure the scene. Federal law enforcement helicopters entered the airspace above the crime scene, spotlighting

the S.W.A.T. team units. Because the local and federal responders were not able to communicate and share information, the lives of the swat team members were jeopardized as the gun man had not been apprehended.

State police are not receiving real time information on incidents which impacts the safety of the state police. For example, if a state police officer is not informed in a timely manner that a bank robbery has occurred, the officer is not then aware that speeding cars entering the highway from the city may be tied to a local robbery.

➢ On 9/11/04 in New York City, 34 police and port authority members lost their lives. 343 fire fighters lives were lost because they were unable to hear the scene details the police helicopter was relaying to other public safety responders

➢ Terrorists are able to communicate better than us; without a common system we cannot keep up with the rising threat of terrorist attacks

➢ Leverage existing policies and infrastructures: More efficient response through better coordination as opposed to adding more responders to the scene

➢ Identify standards to create a solution that is expandable over time to better position ourselves to apply for federal funding in 2005

➢ The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is endorsed and mandated by the President
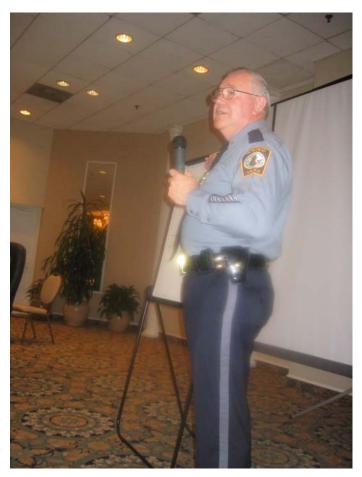
Future State
The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Richmond focus group highlighted the following elements of the Future State of communications interoperability in Virginia:
➢ One common footprint for the entire Commonwealth
➢ 100% of the public safety community have adopted, implemented, and use NIMS
➢ Regional Communications System operates seamlessly on a day to day basis and is interconnected based on mutual aid responses for federal, state, and local
   o Any first responder can go anywhere in the Commonwealth and communicate with local, state, and federal peers
   o 100% P 25 compliance, phase II
   o Clear and common language
   o Technology is intuitive and user-friendly
➢ Legislation requires non vendor specific market driven solutions:

- o Manufacturers compete for our business
- o Expanding systems, and constant leveraging of existing systems

Strategy

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successfully implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

The Richmond team identified the following critical initiatives to achieve communications interoperability statewide:

1. Educate first responders on STARS and the systems' interconnect.
2. Define regions and establish regional coordinators to conduct comprehensive needs and gap assessment and leverage existing resources to close identified gaps.
3. Establish interoperability requirements to receive federal and state funding for localities and state agencies.
4. All stakeholders use clear plain text.
5. Maximize the utilization of existing pathway and radio resources through training.

Barriers

The purpose of the Barriers conversation is to identify factors hindering the effort to achieve the Future State.

The Richmond team identified the following barriers:
- ➢ Moving away from traditions and historical ways to conducting business
- ➢ Insufficient funding

➢ Current priorities perceived by citizens as immediate, such as education and roads, take precedent over investments in potential mutual aid incidents
➢ Buy in as to why the state would potentially develop a plan/system not compatible with the three largest metropolitan areas in the Commonwealth (Northern VA, Tidewater, and Central VA)
➢ Buy in to STARS role
➢ Lack of understanding by elected officials and the general public of the importance and cost associated with interoperability.

Next Steps
The outcomes from the six (6) regional focus group sessions will drive the strategic planning session so that the key initiatives identified can serve as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The strategic planning session is scheduled to take place in Richmond, Virginia on May 18, 2004.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Office of Public Safety and the participants of each focus group as the planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. This report details the results of the Richmond focus group meeting and was distributed to the participants on Friday April 30, 2004. In addition, the results of the conversations with all six (6) focus groups will be made available to all participants by early May.

When asked what the Richmond team could commit to do differently today to improve interoperability in their region, the group committed to:
➢ Remain connected with contacts made during the meeting
➢ Take a more proactive role in articulating system capabilities to users by developing preplanning and predefined protocols in the event of a major disaster.

Participants of the April 27, 2004 focus group meeting, in Richmond, Virginia, on VA Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability:

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